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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: STILL TOO EARLY TO CALL MALAWI'S ELECTION

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¶1. It is still too early to declare the winner of Malawi's 19 May presidential election. As of 5pm on 20 May, the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) had officially endorsed results from only 58 of 3,897 polling stations or 1.5 percent, with President Mutharika in the lead. UNDP colleagues told EmbOffs at MEC headquarters in Blantyre that they believe more than 50 percent of results have been sent to the MEC, but that the MEC has not yet verified them. MEC Chairperson Anastacia Msosa said on Malawi Television that some results had mathematical errors and were being sent back to the polling stations for correction. However, Embassy officials believe calculation errors are not the major cause of the bottleneck and likely affect only a small proportion of ballots.

¶2. The Mission's observation teams returned to Lilongwe as scheduled. The consensus view was that the voting process was well-managed and peaceful. All other international observer teams share this view (reftel).

¶3. In contrast to the MEC's cautious approach, Malawi Television and Zodiak radio have been reporting unofficial results, some of which indicate the President leading in 26 or 28 districts. Several international press outlets, including Reuters and AFP, have picked up on these announcements and are saying that Mutharika has taken an early lead.

¶4. Comment: The MEC's delay in certifying results appears at this point only to be the result of processing efficiency. We expect the bottleneck to be resolved soon. The Ambassador received an invitation today to the next president's inauguration, set for 22 May at 10am. However, a hasty inauguration has risks. The MEC's slow release of official results allows the press to fill the vacuum with unofficial or speculative reports that fuel potentially false expectations. A rushed inauguration could end up tarnishing an otherwise positive election experience by rushing to validate results in the next 24 hours. Malawi's Constitution guarantees presidential candidates the right to contest any irregularities within 48 hours of the declaration of the winner. We note that while the MEC is slow, we strongly believe its painstaking deliberations are part of its efforts to ensure a credible outcome.

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